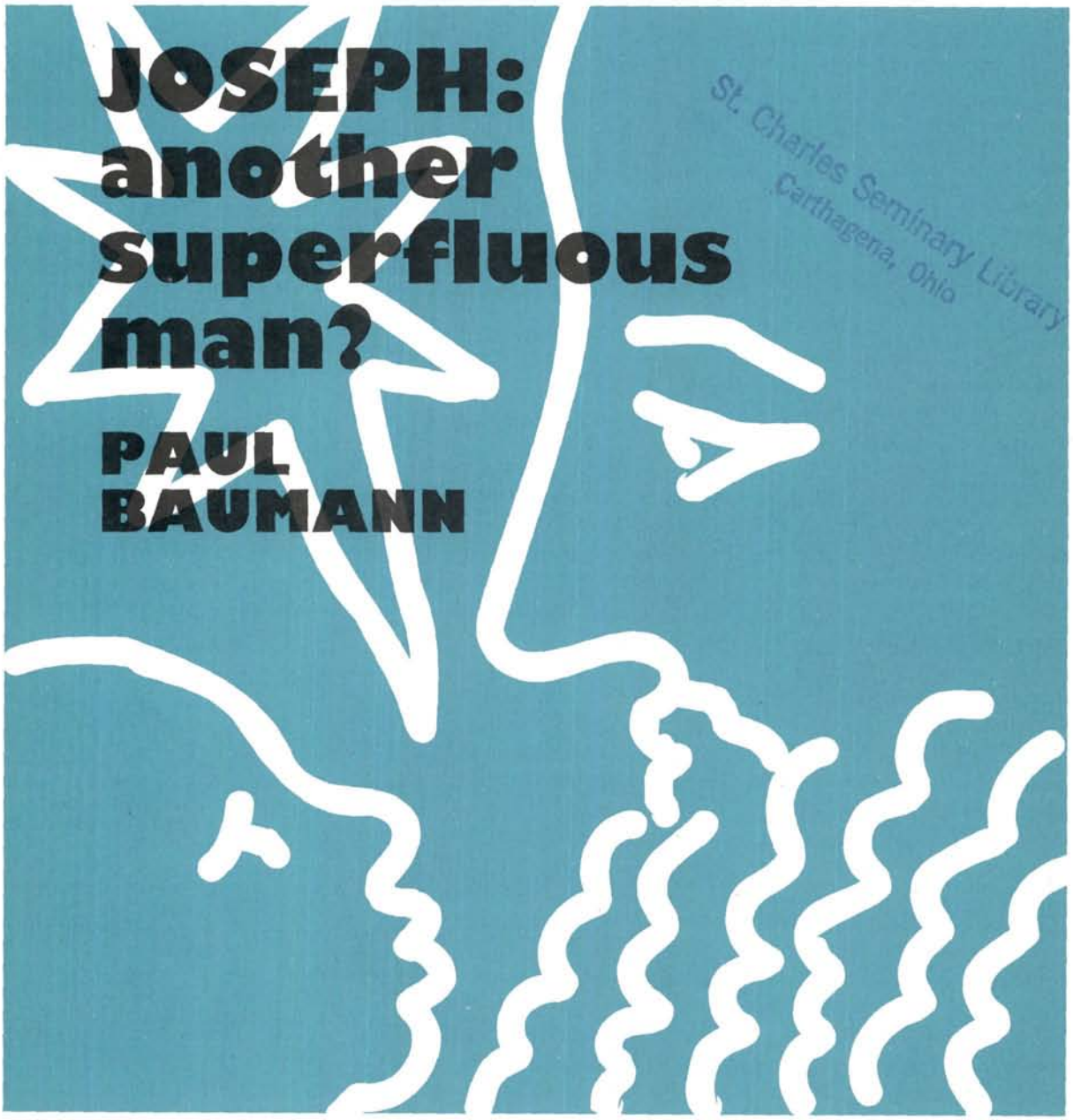
COMMONWEAL

$2.00 December 16, 1994

A CHRISTMAS PAST • ABIGAIL McCARTHY

• HEROD LIVES • MARJ HUMPHREY •



JOSEPH: another superfluous man?

PAUL BAUMANN

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CORRESPONDENCE

Blood isn't the only tie

Philadelphia, Pa.

To the Editors: As the mother of four biological children and one very precious adopted son, I take exception to the glib parenthetical assertion in Sidney Callahan's column ["Kinship Is Forever," November 18] that "[i]nfants exact worship always and everywhere." Try telling that to the more than 1 million children in the United States who now live with adoptive parents, or to the millions in foster care. All of these children have been deprived, in some way, of the "worship" they had every right to expect from their biological kin.

Genetic kinship ties often fall far short of the idealized standard Ms. Callahan sets forth in her commentary on "the conflicting claims of biological versus social parents." The assumption that engendering a child with a partner is the exclusive route to becoming "equally invested [in] and morally responsible for the child" seems rather more reductionist than the "antibiology" quotes the author singles out for criticism. And Callahan's argument that the biological link to children is particularly important during the troubling times of adolescence ignores recent clinical research indicating that adolescents who were adopted as infants exhibit "emotional health and self-image throughout their school years equal [to] those of children living with their biological parents" [Bruce Bower, "Adapting to Adoption," *Science News*, August 13].

There is nothing Callahan says about genetic kinship that could not be applied to the consensual bond we have with our adopted son. To us, the bond is irrevocable and genuine; I feel no less "attuned" to this child than to those who carry my genes.

Biological similarities are irrelevant to the "mutual obligations of the flesh" that bind our adoption-built family together. I feel that our decision to adopt has liberated us from narrowly defined "images and metaphors derived from genetic ties" and has enabled us to experience a more profound understanding of the relationship we are privileged to share—and are obliged to cultivate—with each of our children.

ROSEMARY CONROY HUGHES

The author replies:

Whoa now, wait a minute. My defense of biological kinship and noncontractual familial bonds does not mean that I do not value adoption. In my column I equated adoption with marital and religious bonding, all of which I hold to be universal goods.

But I've already written reams on the value of commitments and promises (my dissertation topic, in fact) and this time out I was trying to articulate those organic values too often dismissed or scorned by rationalistic types.

Of course I recognize that not all biological families are ideal, but then neither are all adoptive families. My remark about wanting to divorce or murder one's adolescents implied no critique of the emotional adjustment of adopted children! It was an attempt to make an ironic joke about parental ambivalence during what's often a difficult period. (At least it was for us.)

As for my "glib parenthetical assertion" about infants exacting worship always and everywhere, this was meant to be a lighthearted comment (paraphrasing the Mass, of course) on the innate appeal of infants—an appeal found, by the by, among other primate groups. Obviously, human beings can suffer dreadful breakdowns in parenting.

When biological kin cannot provide acceptable nurture, I'm convinced that it is an altruistic and joyful privilege to adopt children. In debates on abortion, I've been booed and hissed for advocating and defending adoption. When counseling single young women with crisis pregnancies I've always presented adoption as a positive alternative that can work out well for everyone.

Being in favor of adoption does not mean you must become "liberated" from the value of biological kinship, or erase the differences between them. There can be different goods in life, each of which should receive its due. I stand by what I wrote.

SIDNEY CALLAHAN

Health care stalled

Washington, D.C.

To the Editors: The results of the recent election—Republican control of both houses of Congress—virtually guarantee that there will be no comprehensive health-care

(Continued on page 22)

CORRECTIONS Owing to an editing error, the name of the writer of a letter appearing in Correspondence in the issue of December 2 was misspelled. The correct name is Ann M. Gaughan.

An anonymous reader gently calls attention to an error that appeared in a column by Edward Gaffney, Jr., in the issue of November 4. We (not Mr. Gaffney) gave the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes a new first name. Apologies to Ms. Gaughan and to Messrs. Hobbes and Gaffney.

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COMMONWEAL

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Unsolicited manuscripts are welcome but must be accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope.

Ho, ho, ho

'Tis the season to be thankful, if not always jolly. We will avoid the temptation to be otherwise. No mention here of the Gingrich (R-Ga.) who threatens to steal Christmas along with food stamps, aid to dependent children, and whatever else is lying around unspoken for in Washington. No gloomy musings on the nation's possibly Dole-ful (R-Kans.) prospects. That is the ghost of Christmas Future. Our holiday cheer is so great, in fact, that we will not even stoop to chastising the reckless Helms-man (R-N.C.) for his incontinent rantings about the physical safety of the president. Who would have thought that the Dixie-singing senior senator from North Carolina would harbor subversive sentiments once derided as radical chic?

May you live in interesting times, goes the Chinese imprecation, and so we do. The end of the cold war vindicated liberal democracy, but that victory seems to have brought only discontent and turmoil to American domestic politics. Whatever was left of the New Deal coalition, which forged a politics of shared interests between the poor and the middle class, suffered a resounding rejection last month by the voters. The tenor of current American politics suggests that in the absence of a unifying external threat the nation is wrestling with questions of economic and social equality that go to the heart of the democratic experience.

Perhaps we are only now realizing how much the effort to contain the Soviet Union gave a morally compelling, if sometimes misguided, sense of purpose to our national life. Indeed, much of the political energy behind the nation's effort to wage "war" on poverty and redress a shameful history of racial discrimination was linked to the cold war effort to demonstrate the moral superiority of American life. Deprived of a foreign adversary, we seem eager to rest on our laurels. Yet the social and economic inequalities of American society have not disappeared with the collapse of communism and the near-universal rejection of state socialism. Indeed, if the moral stinginess evident in current public discourse is a harbinger of things to come, John Paul II may have been right to suggest that "Now that communism has gone, the church has to be on the side of the poor; otherwise they will go undefended."

Whatever one's judgment about November's stunning political reversals, a reinvigorated debate about the moral meaning of liberal democracy should be the result. Before the election, Herbert Stein, former chairman of the Richard Nixon's Council of Economic Advisers, deplored the sourness and triviality of recent politics. "The reason is that we have no grand national purpose," he wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* (October 25). Capitalism's triumph, noted this conservative Republican, is finally "a banality." Something more than a call to material progress is needed if the "poverty in our public life" is not to diminish us all.

"In my opinion there is a worthy objective....that would inspire and energize the American people," Stein writes. "That goal would be to improve the quality of life

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In keeping with our Christmas schedule, the next issue of *Commonweal* will be dated January 13, 1995.

of the least advantaged among us and to reduce the hostility and fear among the races. That would not be a goal solely, or even primarily, for the national government, but the national government would have a part."

Such a vision is not being enunciated by Washington's new Republican leaders. Or, for that matter, by their shell-shocked Democratic adversaries. Yet a further democratization of both politics and wealth is needed, and may have been what the electorate was demanding by overturning the status quo in Washington. Society's obligations to the poor must remain high on the agenda of Western democracies. Mere pragmatism or self-interest will not get us very far. As Chesterton said, pragmatism is not a very pragmatic way to get people to cooperate with one another. Without a vision of the good, the sacrifices a common life requires become merely higher taxes.

If American democracy is searching for a new purpose—for a revitalized language to help extend the American promise of equality—religious traditions that remind us of our obligations to defend the dignity of all persons will have much to contribute. At Christmas especially, we are reminded that the lives of the poor, the indigent, and the abandoned have an imperishable meaning. For we believe that God himself once moved among us as just such a one as these. Such a faith, we trust, will continue to have real democratic implications.

ET CETERA

LAWYERLY LITURGY, RENEWAL OF We had solemnly resolved to be the only publication in the country other than the *Chicken Farmers' Gazette* to print absolutely nothing about the trial of O.J. Simpson, but then we saw a piece in the *New York Times* discussing the efforts of Marcia Clark, lead prosecutor, to become more media-friendly, this because she's up against chief defense lawyer Robert L. Shapiro, known in the trade as the "Clausewitz" of media manipulation. Seems that in the pursuit of justice and a conviction, Ms. Clark had changed her hairdo, wardrobe, voice, facial expressions, and style. What caught our eye was this quote on the makeover from Martin Q. Peterson, a trial consultant from Lincoln, Nebraska: "It seemed like the difference between being in a Roman Catholic church when they spoke Latin, and suddenly walking into the Mass in the vernacular. Suddenly I saw a normal person not hiding behind the archaicness of the law but talking real."

PRODUCTIVE RENAISSANCE MAN *Commonweal*'s fedora-wearing business manager Richard Haas is a man of many hats. Orbis has just published his essay "A Loaves and Fishes View of Productivity" in *Embracing Earth: Catholic Approaches to Ecology* (Albert J. LaChance and John E. Carroll, editors, $19.95, 280 pp.). Former *Commonweal* editor David Toolan, S.J., has an essay in that volume as well. Richard is also the author of "The Living Wage Makes Good Business Sense" in the December *U.S. Catholic*, and *We All Have a Share: A Catholic Vision of Prosperity through Productivity* ($14.95, 186 pp.), forthcoming in January from Chicago's ACTA Publications. Richard has done all of this while keeping track of *Commonweal*'s bottom line and the logistics of *Commonweal*'s "Religion and the Media" forums.

When it comes to productivity, Richard not only talks the talk but he walks the walk.

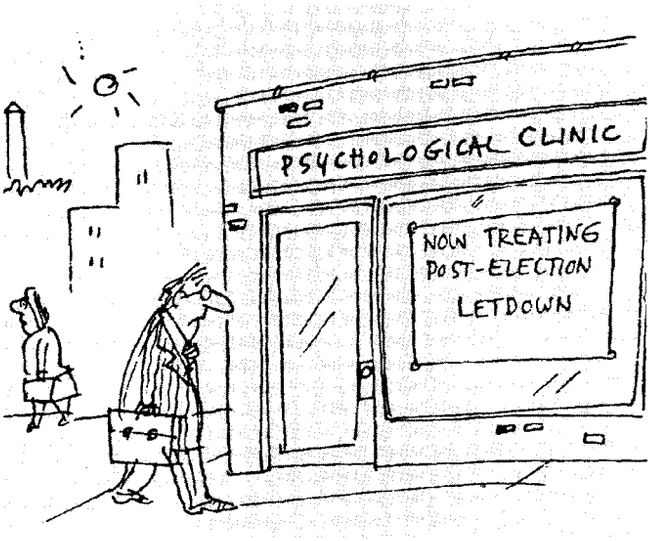
YOU COULD LOOK IT UP (NOT) Speaking in support of requests by women's religious orders for an end to discrimination by the church against women, Archbishop Maurice Couture of Quebec pointed to the *1993 Vatican Yearbook (Annuario pontificio)*; it lists the names of the superiors general of all institutes of men, but none of the names of the superiors general of women (*Origins*, November 3).

Good for the archbishop, but he's ten years late. Writing in the *Religious Life Review* for November-December 1985, our correspondent Larry N. Lorenzoni, S.D.B. [Correspondence, November 18] recalled turning to the *Annuario* to find the name of the superior general of the Fathers of Mercy, an order founded in 1808 which has seven members worldwide. The name was there: the Very Rev. John O'Brien. He also looked for the the name of the superior general of the Salesian Sisters, the second largest congregation of women in the church: nearly 18,000 members. No name. Some of the messages conveyed (Father Lorenzoni, a kind man, says they are "admittedly unintentional but nonetheless inescapable"):

Women are of little consequence in the church.

The father superior of ten men is more important than the mother superior of 10,000 women.

There's no point in publishing the names of women superiors because who needs to know them.



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OF SEVERAL MINDS Abigail McCarthy

A CHRISTMAS PAST

BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

For the past month I have been engaged in the seemingly endless task of sorting through twenty years of my correspondence, manuscripts, and lecture notes for transmittal to the Minnesota Historical Society. Now and then I come across things I would like to share with others once more. The following excerpt is from an article written in the 1970s. It could easily have been written for this year's Commonweal *Christmas issue:*

"He has a pointy nose," said my little sister Ellen, looking at the plaster Christ Child with outflung arms and curly brown hair. I was only seven then and shocked at such irreverent comment on a holy object, and more shocked at the unrepressed laughter of the grownups.

The plaster figure had been a concession on their part to the solemn piety and customs my middle sister Anne and I were acquiring at the parish school. For the first time that year we had a Christmas crib, as we called it then in Minnesota, using the old English word for "manger"—the fashionable word "crèche" was to come into use later.

Our crib was not completely satisfactory. We did not have the numerous attendant figures which made the crib in our church so wonderful; we did not have shepherds and sheep, not even an angel. Our curiously mature infant was backed by a disproportionately small china Virgin, which had been my grandmother's, and was usually in our bedroom, and by a Saint Joseph who stared straight ahead in rather splendid indifference, holding his staff with the lily.

But it was our crib, and we had surrounded it—three small girls in flannel nightgowns, our small brother in his woolly, footed sleeper. We said our prayers and sang "Silent Night." Then we were hurried off to our cold rooms, to beds high with quilts. There we would—though shivery with the almost unbearable excitement of Christmas Eve—drift into sleep with the muffled sound of the grownups, moving mysteriously about, coming through the registers in the floor.

The tree would have gone up only that afternoon, because we did not begin Christmas earlier in those days. But it would stay up through New Year's and five days more until Little Christmas, which we later learned to call Epiphany, the feast of the three kings.

That year when I was seven, we still used candles to light the tree, clipped to the branches in small silvery holders. As soon as it was faintly dark they were lit and glowed and flickered dangerously, evoking the first magic of Christmas Eve, which for us began at dark.

We would have been out that afternoon—escorted by Evelyn, the "hired girl," as excited as we—laden with little boxes of Christmas cookies which she and my mother had been baking all week, wafer-thin ginger and sugar cookies in the shape of chicks and rocking horses, bells and wreaths.

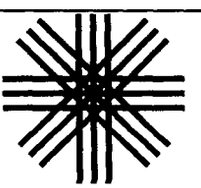
In each house we visited there was the excitement of the tree going up and the smell of baking ginger or mince. We presented our cookies and received a gift of the specialty of each house in return—gingerbread, fresh-made peanut brittle, white Christmas fudge, candied orange peel.

Now, after the first lighting of the tree, we would bundle up to go out again with my father and mother to our grandmother's house for Christmas Eve supper.

We ran before them, our feet in buckled overshoes making squeaking noises in the packed snow underfoot, a sound peculiar to our freezing northern winter. Although we did not know it then, we were running from the celebration of Christmas awaited to the celebration of Christmas remembered.

My cheerful, kindly grandfather was living then, but I thought of it as my grandmother's house. She was at its center—a bright-eyed woman with a fine, high-bridged nose and high arched brows under masses of white hair. My grand-aunt lived there, too, and my young unmarried aunt, a teacher, would be home for the holidays.

We children would fight to be the first to ring the bell by twisting the black, wrought-iron handle—and then burst in



THE GRAYMOOR PRIZE

Unfettered by tradition, the COMMONWEAL editors have broken with all precedent and awarded this year's Graymoor Prize to a single author. Our winner is George Dardess of Rochester, New York. Mr. Dardess's remarkable essay on "When a Christian Chants the Qur'an" uncovers much hopeful common ground between Christianity and Islam as well as presents a most engaging reflection on spiritual aspiration and prayerful practice. Mr. Dardess's more earthly reward is $1,000.

We would like to thank all those who submitted manuscripts for this year's prize, and we would especially like to thank the Friars of the Atonement for sponsoring the essay contest, which has the important goal of encouraging new ecumenical ideas and perspectives.

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before anyone could answer, bringing the cold with us into the living room which seemed only an antechamber to the large dining room and the kitchen which were the center of living in that house.

The dining room would have lost its everyday look. On Christmas Eve the table was extended with leaves and covered with damask, its hem-stitched border touching the floor. It was set with my grandmother's best china and silver and crowded with covered dishes and cut-glass bowls soon to be passed round and round with cranberry sauce, dill pickles, and spiced crab apples, with mashed potatoes, buttered yellow squash, and fruit salad. And last of all, the warm platter was brought from the kitchen heaped with codfish cakes in cream sauce.

The Christmas Eve brought to us in our grandmother's house was a Christmas which had been carried from a fisherman's cottage in the west of Ireland to a stone house in Nova Scotia, then to a log house on a claim in the Minnesota Territory, and finally to this small, green-shuttered clapboard house a stone's throw from the Mississippi in our little county-seat town.

It was the Christmas of a people accustomed to scarcity but with a great love of being together, of talking and eating and sharing a quiet sense of fun. The heart of it was the ingathering family feast in the evening and the Mass at dawn. Aside from the gleaming table and a small heap of wrapped gifts, its outward sign was the candle in the front window, "lighting the Christ Child on his way."

Over our heads as we sat at the table the talk went around of past Christmases when the house was crowded with my young uncles and my other aunt, before they had homes of their own.

Now and again the talk went further back to Christmases on the farm, to evenings of corn-popping and taffy pulls, of vacations where Grand-Aunt Nell's friends came out from town in bobsleds for an evening of sliding down the hills in the farm's great wooden butter bowls, of whirling round and laughing under the winter stars. We ate and we listened, not liking the codfish much, but knowing it was part of Christmas and prologue to the morning. Our grandmother's Christmas merged easily into ours.

We went back to our different signs of Christmas—to the tree and the crib, the stockings hanging on a twine line across the mantel, to our vague belief in Santa Claus and the certainty of wonderful presents to come. There was yet no Midnight Mass and we were thought too small to get up at four and struggle through the winter dark to the dawn Mass, but we were up and waiting impatiently at the head of the stairs when our parents came home.

As soon as we saw their shadows on the glass of the front door, we catapulted down the stairs and leaped on them, hugging and shouting, "Merry Christmas," feeling the cold of outdoors on my mother's fur and laughing at the frost on my father's mustache. Then with them into the living room where the stockings were now full and wonders lay about the tree. We never questioned how it was that the dolls were so beautifully outfitted or that my brother's tricycle was the image of the most expensive one in Fred O'Reilly's store—the one my grandfather had looked at again and again. It is only now in remembering that we can be grateful for the hours which went into the sewing and my grandfather's painful saving.

Background to our delight was my mother's laughing and my father's exclamations of feigned surprise. My mother lived only two more years after that Christmas, and my father never seemed to me the same again. Perhaps I have layered that Christmas with memories of Christmases which came before and after it. But it has been at the heart of all Christmases since. In remembering it, I know that Christmas is, quite literally, the feast of joy come into the world. Christmas is our joy remembered and the certainty that joy can be given. It is enough to have known it once. □

OF SEVERAL MINDS David R. Carlin, Jr.

NAME YOUR BRAND

ALL LIBERALISMS AREN'T EQUAL

In the November 18, 1994, issue of *Commonweal*, the editorial ("Liberals & Catholics") opened with the intriguing and highly pertinent question, "Can Catholics be liberals?" While granting that liberalism has its shortcomings, most notably its "agnosticism concerning the good" and its "tendency to foster extreme individualism," the editors concluded that there is no essential incompatibility. Catholicism should not treat liberalism as an enemy but rather as a friend who has fallen on bad times, a friend in need. Drawing on our religious tradition, we Catholics can bring to liberalism "an emphasis on the social nature of the human person and the social bonds that bind society together." The editors add that this question will be discussed further in the coming year.

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Since *Commonweal* has always had a dual identity as both Catholic and liberal, the editorial conclusion that Catholicism and liberalism are compatible probably did not surprise anyone. Nor will it come as much of a surprise when one of the magazine's columnists agrees with the editors—not even when the writer in question has frequently used his column to indicate his profound unhappiness with contemporary liberalism.

"Can Catholics be liberals?" It all depends on what you mean by "Catholic" and "liberal." (Perhaps it even depends on what you mean by "be"—a question upon which much was said by Thomas Aquinas, who Acton said was the first Whig.) But space is short here. So I'll go light on "Catholic" and concentrate today on "liberal," a term whose meaning has been far more mutable.

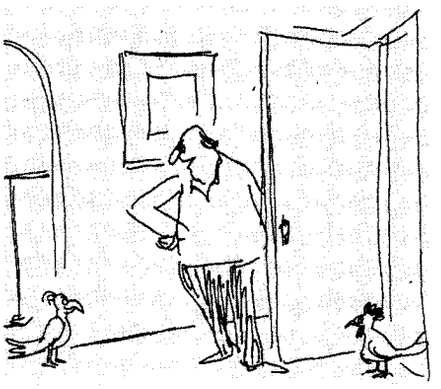
During the first three quarters of the nineteenth century, liberalism came in three main varieties: Continental, British, and American.

1. Continental liberalism was strongly anticlerical, especially in Catholic countries such as France, Italy, and Spain. ("Anticlerical" was a polite word for "anti-Catholic," much the way "pro-choice" is today a polite word for "pro-abortion.") This liberalism believed in freedom of trade, press, religion, along with church-state and church-school separation. Late-twentieth-century Catholics would find little to object to in such a program; but nineteenth-century popes, above all Pius IX, were having none of it. They viewed it, probably correctly, as the ideology of an aggressive and highly secularized elite bent on emasculating Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular.

2. British liberalism was a marriage of convenience between two quite opposite worldviews: Utilitarianism, which was essentially atheistic or at least resolutely agnostic; and the Dissenting Protestantism of the pious middle classes. The Utilitarians tended to be discreet about their infidelity, largely because they had no wish to antagonize their far more numerous Evangelical allies.

3. Prior to the Civil War, American liberalism was almost purely religious in complexion, with hardly any admixture of secularism. Of course much liberal leadership was provided by Unitarians, whom conservative Protestants of the time accused of having a religion that was nothing more than a way-station on the road to infidelity. In retrospect it appears the critics were correct. But there was nothing insincere about the religiosity of the Unitarians; they were honestly persuaded that theirs was the purest form of Christianity.

Was nineteenth-century Catholicism compatible with nineteenth-century liberalism? In the case of continental liberalism, not at all; in the case of British liberalism, pretty much so; and in the case of American liberalism, very much so. In other words, the more Catholic the country, the more incompatible its liberalism with Catholicism; whereas the more Protestant the country, the more compatible. And of course this is



"One of your fine-feathered friends to see you."

exactly the way Rome responded in practice. It detested continental liberalism; it had no strong objections to British liberalism (even though Gladstone wrote a book denouncing the dogma of papal infallibility); and it thought the United States was on the whole a fine place for Catholics.

In twentieth-century America there have been two main types of liberalism, one more compatible with Catholicism than any prior form, the other thoroughly incompatible.

1. New Deal liberalism, which was dominant in the United States from the early 1930s through the mid-1960s, was close to perfect from a Catholic point of view. Respect was shown for the church, its doctrines, its moral code. Government was strong, but not excessively so. Its power was used to assist the poor, the aged, the unemployed; to protect the rights of labor unions; to check the economic freedom of capitalists. In the postwar period the United States became the principal opponent of Rome's old enemy, atheistic communism. In the mid-1960s, just before it went down in flames in Vietnam, New Deal liberalism had its final triumphs: civil rights for blacks; Head Start for the poor; and, for the elderly, Medicare, Social Security COLAs, and subsidized housing. All this was thoroughly in accord with the teachings of the social and political encyclicals.

2. A new kind of liberalism emerged from the great cultural upheavals of the late '60s and early '70s. To this day it has no agreed-upon name: let's call it the liberalism of the cultural Left. This newer liberalism is highly secularistic: sometimes deliberately antireligious, sometimes only nonreligious. Its fundamental value is that society should have no fundamental values—except of course the value that holds all values to be as good as all other values. Or to put this in other terms, it believes in unlimited personal autonomy, including above all the freedom to construct one's values and moral code, the freedom not to have these imposed on one by others. Of course a minimal amount of law and order must be maintained; but beyond that people should be free to do, say, think, and feel whatever they please. Hence this liberalism approves of abortion on demand, gay marriage, condoms in schools, the equality of all cultures, and the equality of all forms of "family" (whether married or not, two parents or one, gay or straight). It goes without saying that this kind of liberalism is totally incompatible with Catholicism.

To put it in the language of logic textbooks: to say in the old days that a person was a Catholic and a New Deal liberal was close to a tautology; whereas to say that one is a Catholic and a cultural left liberal is a contradiction in terms.

But if so, how come there are people who don't feel this contradiction? How can there be Catholics who endorse the agenda, or at least much of the agenda, of cultural left liberalism? Let me save that question till another day. □

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HEROD LIVES

THE STORY FROM SUDAN

MARJ HUMPHREY

Last year, in Nimule, a village in southern Sudan, Christmas burst upon me with a joy unlike any I have ever experienced. Its memory still unleashes in me the same set of physical responses I felt at the time: pounding heart, a burning fullness of eyes and throat akin to sorrow, a restlessness and excitement that beg for release. Perhaps I was just caught up with the celebratory crowd in Nimule. Or perhaps it was that I had not expected such joy amidst such uncertainty and sorrow. But for me, the Word was made Flesh.

December came with its usual stifling summer heat, made more oppressive by the proximity of the Nile. Sudan, the largest country in Africa, means "swamp," so named because of vast marshy areas that are impassable during the rainy season. But this was the dry season, and with it an ominous fear settles over southern Sudan. For the past twelve years, the annual dry season has meant the time when the northern-based Islamic government in Khartoum has been able to deploy its ground troops against the renegade South. There, black African Christian and animist southerners, via the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), have battled the imposition of the strict Islamic *sharia* law by the northern, predominantly Arabic government. Khartoum, backed by both Iran and Iraq, sees a victory over the South as part of a holy war intended to Islamicize all of sub-Saharan Africa.

The Khartoum government's human rights abuses are legion. They were recently well-documented by Gaspar Biro, UN Special Rapporteur, whose scathing report cited widespread torture, disappearances, killing, slave-trading, and trafficking in children. I recall hearing a government official on the BBC respond to Dr. Biro's report: With chilling calm, he likened Biro to Salman Rushdie, and promised that Biro would be held responsible for his insults to Islam.

So fear always increases in southern Sudan in the dry season. But it had intensified over the last three years. The SPLA itself had splintered into factional groups along tribal lines, causing a new wave of fear and terror that left in its wake a dispirited, demoralized population, now in constant flight from both northern bombs and southern tribal slaughter.

But last December, it had been blessedly quiet in Nimule. In fact, at the small medical clinic where I worked we had settled into a routine that gave a thin veneer of normalcy. The population, which had fled the bloody infighting and bombings several times over the previous two years (some of them having traversed the huge country on foot, to Ethiopia and back again) had finally been able to settle somewhat. Food and medicines were getting through with some regularity. The clinic was packed, but those we couldn't see one day returned patiently the next. The number of TB patients under treatment reached 500. Many of them had started treatment before, but had never been able to stay in one place long enough to complete the six- to nine-month course of medication needed for a cure.

A small school for girls had opened, run by an extraordinary Ugandan nun who had been forced to relocate it through repeated evacuations. Fourteen girls arrived over the course of a few weeks when word got out that the school had been reopened in Nimule. Some were orphans; others were sent by family for safety and the hope of some education. They lived in a mud-brick house next to ours on the mission compound, and we became family. I loved walking home from the clinic each afternoon, passing their house as they sat out on straw mats sorting rice or chopping onions for dinner. Sometimes they would

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show me their lessons for the day, and sometimes Rachel or Lucy would work with me on the Arabic phrases I was trying to learn for my clinic work.

In the midst of it all was Nyambiling, a five-year-old orphan girl who had captured everyone's heart—including my own. She had been sent to the mission a year earlier by her ailing grandmother who could no longer care for her. Her father had been killed, her mother had died of TB in one of the refugee camps, and TB had racked Nyambiling's own small body. But now she was a healthy, mischievous, enterprising little survivor, and very much our *belle* of the ball! The older girls, ranging in age from seven to fourteen years, protected and cared for her as if she were their own.

School was out for the Christmas holidays. Each afternoon the girls would come to our house and take turns opening the appropriate little "door" for that date on the African Advent calendar. They delighted in each small picture, usually an animal, fruit, or flower. One night just before Christmas, we got out a miniature paper Christmas tree, eighteen inches high, a friend had sent us from the States. It had tiny ornaments, and six colored lights that twinkled with the aid of an AA battery. Some of us laughed at its tackiness, but the girls loved that tree, and each put an ornament on as we explained to them our American custom.

Christmas Eve came, a beautiful starlit night, perfect for the outdoor Mass. People had been arriving for hours, walking and singing in eager anticipation. We were to begin by processing behind the cross, decorated with the only festive material available—streamers of blue toilet paper. As we began to file around the church, singing to the beat of the drums, I suddenly saw those around me differently. They were all people I had grown accustomed to seeing in various places throughout the days, but never before had I seen them with such a cumulative view. Now I found myself surrounded by broken bodies: limbs distorted from polio; limbs misshapen from untreated and poorly healed fractures; stumps that are the feet of the lepers; young amputees with legs lost to bullets or land mines; and one man crawling along the ground with his hands, dragging his twisted, useless legs behind. But they were all singing their hearts out with joy over the birth of the Savior

We settled on stools or on mats on the ground, and Mass began. One parishioner and his wife proudly bore their newborn child to the altar. They became our Holy Family. We heard the Nativity Gospel read and translated into different languages for each tribe; we heard how Jesus was born in exile, too, to parents far from home.

Then the Offertory began. From the back of the church, fourteen girls, resplendent in colorful cloth, began to sing, and then slowly move toward the altar in an intricate dance, strewing flower petals on all of us along the way. *Our* girls, my possessive heart cried, swelling with an unexpected maternal pride. They had kept their dance a secret from us, their gift, practiced clandestinely for days. They blushed and beamed afterwards as we heaped our praises on them for their beautiful offering.

Shortly after Christmas I had to return to Nairobi, Kenya, for several months of administrative duties. I left on one of the small relief flights amidst hearty good-bys and promises to return as soon as I could; little Nyambiling asking if she could come with me.

Charles W. Pratt

Firstborn

Who in that warm
and watery dark
seemed no more
than a question mark

bursts wide the doors
and with a cry
affirms she is
triumphant I.

On March 1, 1994, the village of Nimule was bombed, heralding a new season of terror. Most of the bombs landed in empty fields, but a twelve-year-old girl gathering firewood was killed. I was not there when it happened. A few weeks before, the "dry season offensive" had begun in earnest some 100 kilometers away. Everyone knew the bombing was a "softening up" for the ground offensive that would follow.

I was able to return to Nimule just before Holy Week. When I did it was to a village I barely recognized. The buildings were the same, but the people were not. The girls were gone, sent away for their own safety. Little Nyambiling was in a refugee camp in Uganda. Tension was palpable. Sudden noises evoked startled responses. Every far-off sound of an engine brought terrified silence, and activity would cease as everyone listened intently. Sometimes the sound turned out to be only a far-off lorry approaching on the road; sometimes it was a relief flight bringing goods. But sometimes the distinct, low, grinding drone of Khartoum's Antinov bomber became unmistakable, and then, even before the plane could be seen, people panicked. The crowd at the clinic screamed and women frantically searched and grabbed for their children out playing. Everyone fled to the nearest bunker, ditch, or whatever low spot could be found. Although the village had not been bombed since March, the Antinov made a cruel habit of appearing unexpectedly two or three times a week, striking sickening fear into everyone.

I had never before experienced a bomber directly overhead. It is terrifying. The moment when it flies directly overhead, the plane seems to hang there, indefinitely; the seconds are elongated, suspended for what seems like an hour. I grew nauseous, lightheaded; my body shook. And the response never lessened with each repeat experience.

With the increase in military activity, however, a new kind of terror was added. The SPLA army began a *kasha*—forced conscription of all able-bodied males. They pulled the men out

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of their beds at night, took them to the rebel barracks, and beat them into submission. Teen-aged boys were not exempt. The men and boys took to hiding in the bush at night; but if they were discovered and tried to escape, they were shot in the leg. By May, ten-year-olds were being taken to the front, and two of the workers at the clinic had their ten- and eleven-year-old sons abducted at night from home.

It was in this atmosphere that Holy Week arrived. Plans were made for the Easter Vigil. It would have to be held on Holy Saturday afternoon, since it was not safe for people to be out at night. But wouldn't such a large crowd be easily visible to the Antinov should it pass over?

Holy Saturday brought its own miracle. We awoke to gathering storm clouds. We cheered and thanked God: A cloud cover meant little likelihood of the bomber. The atmosphere remained tense, but slowly people began to arrive. By 5 P.M. a large crowd had gathered and excitement was mounting. There were to be sixty baptisms at the Vigil, mostly infants and children, but several adults as well. As the baptismal waters began to flow, drumming, singing, and dancing took over and the excitement reached a fever pitch. Two women fell to the ground, and several men rushed forward and began a ritual-like waving of their hands over their heads: "They can feel the evil going out of them, and the men are helping to hasten the evil spirits' departures," I was told. The rest of the Mass was a joyous, even raucous celebration of victory over evil. As night descended, the crowd grew quiet, and one by one each person placed the end of a stick into the paschal candle to carry a bit of the Light home with them. I can still see the glowing ends of the sticks in the dark, starless night, scattering into the bush like a thousand fireflies.

Easter morning dawned sunny and bright and the festive mood continued. After Mass the children, adorned in traditional dress, performed dances and played games. But then, into the middle of it all, came an official UN Landrover. They had bad news. Khartoum's troops had broken through another stronghold and were now dangerously close to the three large refugee camps an hour north of us. The camps would have to be evacuated immediately, and we should prepare for a massive movement of refugees through our area as they headed toward a clearing fifteen miles to the east of us which was hastily being prepared as a camp. We, ourselves, should be on evacuation alert, ready for departure at a moment's notice.

Over the next few days, we witnessed a massive, awesome human event: Thousands of Sudanese, walking in eerie silence and looking straight ahead. What began as a trickle became a stream, then a mighty river: 30,000 people, walking barefoot and silent down a winding, hilly road, past the mission to somewhere beyond. They carried their children and their few possessions—a chicken, a half-bag of grain, a cooking pot, a sheet of plastic tarp for shelter. Always, they walked at night, out of fear of the bomber, each new wave visible from the mission only in the grey, predawn light.

On Easter Tuesday, the second morning of the evacuation, I returned to my room feeling frustrated and helpless. Half-heartedly and preoccupied, I picked up the readings for the day, Jesus on the road to Emmaus: "'Are you the only one who has not heard of the events of the last two days?' they asked him, their eyes downcast. 'He was the one we thought could save us....'"

Two days later, I again boarded a small plane for Nairobi. This time there were no hearty good-bys, no promises of return. I wondered if I would ever see any of these people again and where they would all end up. I hoped for each of them that their next road would be to Emmaus.

As I boarded the six-seater, I was briefly introduced to a young woman passenger whose name I recognized; she was the BBC reporter whose fine reports from Sudan I had often heard. I acknowledged the introduction but I was preoccupied. As the plane taxied the open field that was the airstrip, I couldn't get the grim, overwhelming image of what I had just seen and was leaving behind out of my head. Then the plane ascended, veered sharply, and rapidly left Sudan behind. As it did so, I heard the reporter mumble to anyone who was listening, "Do you believe what you have just seen?" We all silently shook our heads. No.

"And now there is no story here," she said.

"What?" I asked. "How can there be no story?"

And she began to tell us the news that had just begun reaching the wires, the news of another African country not so far away...Rwanda.

The horrifying stories of Rwanda continued to unfold as the weeks went by and I sat numbly at my desk in Nairobi. They left me shocked and stunned, as they have left the entire world.

As I write now, in the second week of Advent, 650,000 people are reported to be displaced in southern Sudan and another 400,000 have fled to neighboring countries. According to reports from London, 15,000 members of Khartoum's Popular Defense Force, joined by Islamic militants from Afghanistan and Tunisia, have launched this year's "final offensive" against what they call the "cross-worshiping" South. Aid agencies say that the new offensive could create hundreds of thousands of new refugees in the Horn of Africa. In Nimule, there will be little singing this Christmas. □

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SAINT JOSEPH, a.k.a. LEOPOLD BLOOM

ON FATHERHOOD & HOPEFULNESS

PAUL BAUMANN

We were lying in bed discussing our children, as married people sometimes do just before turning off the light and just after tossing aside in bitter and covetous disgust the real estate transactions in the local newspaper. How can there be peace with justice if one's neighbors' property values ascend heavenward while yours languish in purgatorial suspension? But to whom does the beleaguered and undervalued property owner, fantasizing a killing on the real estate market and early retirement to pursue pious works, cry? To Saint Joseph, another overanxious father? To Saint Joseph, the patron saint of petit-bourgeois dutifulness and uxorious discipline ("When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took his wife, but knew her not until she had borne a son; and he called his name Jesus")? To Saint Joseph the obedient taxpayer ("In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled")? To the church's patron of harried fathers of families ("And he rose up and took the child and his mother by night, and departed to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod") and working men ("Is this not the son of the woodworker?")? What satisfaction can one expect from the heavenly solicitor for such notoriously undervalued properties as Peru, Belgium, Canada, and China? Or should I petition "Joseph the Joiner," as James Joyce impiously described the world's most famous carpenter, cuckold, and foster father, "patron of the happy demise of all unhappy marriages"? (More on that soon.)

But about our children. Those mites of God's clay, the fruit of our lawful embraces. (Joyce again. He was, after all, a family man if not a property owner. And, as it turns out, a keen ruminator on Saint Joseph's travail.) Would our oldest, heir apparent and apparent visitor from Mars, ever learn to pay attention and stop tormenting his sister, we asked each other. Would she ever stop tormenting him—not that he didn't deserve it. Why does he act like that, anyway? It can't be sex; he's only ten. Maybe it is sex. Jesus. When will the two-year-old stop throwing her dinner dishes across the kitchen and taking off her soiled diaper in the living room? Where did they come from? How would Saint Joseph handle this? Patiently, I know.

Ah, family life. If it didn't have a patron saint, someone would have to invent one. How did we, once vowed to perpetual procrastination, get in so deep among the pacifiers, Legos, and dollies? How did we come to a reconciliation with plastic and polyester, with Pampers and the color pink? How did my life end up looking more like Saint Joseph's than like my original role model, James Bond?

It is in the nature of things, I suppose. Turning to my overworked, overwrought, and under-Catholicized (read Jewish) wife, I put a hand on her deflated belly, that omphalos of our little world. Each of our children had kicked but more often fluttered about *in utero*, and I remembered how uncanny and unnerving it was to feel such palpable life inside my wife's familiar body. ("And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit....") My wife, too, thought of that mysterious liquid universe in which her children leapt and tumbled as numinous and achingly wondrous as first love. An unexpected, unearned, incalculable visitation. "Yes," she said, "yes," in the manner of Joyce's expansive Molly Bloom but in shorter sentences. "For he has done great things for me," she might have said in the manner of Mary according to Luke. What could I do but stand by at a discreet distance, seeming to tend the live-

PAUL BAUMANN *is the associate editor of* Commonweal. *This essay has been adapted from A* Tremor of Bliss: Contemporary Writers on the Saints, *edited by Paul Elie.* *Copyright 1994 © by Paul Baumann. Reprinted by permission of Harcourt Brace & Company.*

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stock somewhat in the manner of Saint Joseph? He who was entrusted, as tradition tells us, with the sublime secret of the Incarnation and, more prosaically, the care and guardianship of Virgin and son.

I want to get at the curiously diffident figure of Joseph by way of Joyce, and by aligning him with the equally self-effacing figure of Leopold Bloom, the cuckolded hero of *Ulysses*. The truths of fiction and the truths of biblical religion are not unrelated. Certain aspects of reality can only be captured in narrative and storytelling. Like liturgy, literature uses language and drama to immerse us in a recreated and revivified world. Karl Rahner, the late German theologian, writes of the lives of saints that "the events of this earthly life are not simply gone and past, over and done with forever, but they are preparatory steps that belong to us for eternity, that belong to us as our living future."

That is not a bad way to describe what happens in Joyce's novel. *Ulysses* employs a variety of narrative techniques, especially parody and stream of consciousness, to present the events of one day, June 16,1904, in Dublin. Stephen Dedalus, an aspiring writer, and Leopold Bloom and his wife Molly are the central characters. Mimicking the mythic structure of Homer's *Odyssey*, Joyce follows Stephen and Bloom, his Telemachus and Ulysses, as they wander the city on their mundane rounds and unknowingly in search of one another. Joyce pulls back the veil before the quotidian to reveal the mythic or transcendent quality of human existence. In this regard, I think the tribute to that "insignificant man" Joseph in Rahner's collection of sermons, *The Great Church Year*, can aptly be applied to the inconspicuous Leopold Bloom: "the life of this insignificant man did have significance; it had one meaning that, in the long run counts in each person's life: God and his incarnate grace....Who can doubt that this man is a good patron for us? This man of humble, everyday routine, this man of silent performance of duty, of honest righteousness and of manly piety, this man who was charged with protecting the grace of God in its embodied life?"

Joyce, as is well known, imbued his fiction with the kind of spiritual revelations or "epiphanies" he no longer found compelling in Irish Catholicism. He created the kind of mysteries, enigmas, and signs in his fiction that he had initially found in Catholic doctrine and ritual, and he borrowed freely from Catholicism in doing so. As Malcolm Bradbury has written, Joyce's work retains the redemptive imagery of the church as well as its message of love.

For Joyce, artistic creativity mimics and even partakes of the mystery of creation itself. Fatherhood is emblematic of the power and paradoxes of creation. Who is a father and who a son is not at all easy to unravel. Stephen Dedalus, the novel's protagonist and a spiritual orphan, must find his way to Leopold Bloom, his mystical foster father. In the maternity hospital scene where Stephen finally meets Bloom, Joyce celebrates the mystery of new life in his commendation of a new father. "By heaven, Theodore Purefoy, thou has done a doughty deed and no botch!" Joyce rejoices. "Thou art, I vow, the remarkablest progenitor barring none in this chaffering allincluding most farraginous chronicle. Astounding! In her lay a Godframed Godgiven preformed possibility which thou has fructified with thy modicum of man's work. Cleave to her! Serve! Toil on, labor like a very bandog and let scholarment and all Malthusiasts go hang. Thou art all their daddies, Theodore. Art drooping under thy load, bemoiled with butcher's bills at home and ingots (not thine!) in the countinghouse? Head up!"

Maybe it takes a Joyce to evoke without cliché the joy and nagging mystery of fatherhood—its uncertainties so easily distorted by the language of "family values." Bemoiled with bills and drooping under a freely willed load puts the right gleeful spin on the mock epic adventure of fatherhood and husbanding. Conceivably the angel's real words to Joseph were, Cleave to her! Serve! Toil on, labor like a very bandog. At least that's what Joseph appears to have done.

Understanding what fatherhood's "modicum of man's work" entails is not a straightforward proposition. Joseph's fate, like Leopold Bloom's, is especially suggestive. You have to be given one of those heedless Godframed Godgiven preformed possibilities to appreciate how onerous and liberating custodianship can be. That paradox is compounded by the constant and eerie discovery of oneself in one's offspring. "I'm becoming my father," moans one exasperated son after another as he raises his children. In this regard Joyce reminds us that the Virgin Mary in fact gives birth to a son who is also her own father. "Paternity may be a legal fiction," Stephen Dedalus further speculates. "Who is the father of any son that any son should love him or he any son....Fatherhood...is a necessary evil....Fatherhood in the sense of conscious begetting, is unknown to man. It is a mystical estate, an apostolic succession, from only begetter to only begotten. On that mystery and not on the madonna which the cunning Italian intellect flung to the mob of Europe the church is founded and founded irremovably because founded, like the world, macro- and microcosm, upon the void."

Stephen Dedalus finds that mystical estate, that spiritual legacy, in the advertising canvasser Leopold Bloom, the uncommon common man Joyce makes the unlikely hero of his novel. In this sense, Bloom can be seen as a kind of Joseph—and perhaps Joseph as a kind of Bloom. Every new creation needs a foster father, Joyce contends. Even the incarnated God needed one.

But to return, for the moment, to my wife and me in our bourgeois bedroom. The metaphysical connotations of fatherhood alluded to above had more or less banished comparative real estate values from my mind. So I contemplated further how those mites of God's clay had forged a bond between my wife and me that was deeper than the word "domesticity" suggests. That is, in fact, as deep as the world itself—which is what I take Joyce to mean when he describes human life as "soaring imperishable impalpable being." Like a good many couples, we had known each other for many years before marrying and having children. We were, after all, urged

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on to self-fufillment as a generational, even constitutional duty. But now there are (gulp) three more very Godpossibled and equally grasping souls in the picture. We had somehow let scholarment and all Malthusiasts go hang. But while our world had become more crowded, I would argue that it also became larger. "For sirs," Stephen Dedalus puts it, sounding uncannily like Pope John Paul II, "...our lust is brief. We are means to those small creatures within us and nature has other ends than we."

I ventured to express these aboriginal feelings to my less mystically inclined roommate.

"Children are a real bond, don't you think," I said dreamily.

"Yes they are," she replied with a slyness of tone that should have alerted me to the banana peel ahead. "So where, exactly, do you fit in?"

My wife laughed. ("But as he considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not fear....'") Not a wicked or unfriendly laugh. More a knowing laugh. I took this teasing in the spirit in which it was intended. At least I think I took it in the spirit in which it was intended. It was, in part, a legitimate complaint about the dishes I had left unwashed in the sink. But it was more. Saint Joseph, I vaguely remember, appeared before me at that moment.

Well, maybe he didn't exactly appear. But Joseph's notorious marital forbearance did cross my mind. It was not so much that my wife was about to reveal the up-till-then unsuspected real paternity of my children. At least I have received no hint of such a complication. No, it was rather that Saint Joseph's unique circumstances exemplify the ambiguities surrounding paternity already alluded to.

My wife was asserting, in her whimsical way, a certain primacy of place in regard to our offspring. I took no offense. While I don't think biology is destiny, I do think that it is, well, biology. *Ulysses*, for example, devotes each episode to an oblique discussion of a different bodily organ. "My book is among other things the epic of the human body," Joyce said. And the procreative body obviously takes center stage. The ties that bind mothers to children are physiologically irrefutable, emotionally unmistakable, and, I realize, culturally highly suspect. Nevertheless, I confess that I suspect motherhood is closer to the center of things, if by the center we mean the source of life. "They all write about some woman," Molly Bloom observes.

Fathers, however, are physically detached, apart. Connection must be forged. Motherhood is an irrevocable umbilical connection. Women carry life within them as well as nurture it with the substance of their own bodies. (That's transubstantiation for you!) Fatherhood is an artifice in a way motherhood never can be. In some sense it really is a matter of apostolic succession, a leap of faith—is that why we call God the Father Almighty? Mommy seems to come first in myth, fairy tale, and popular prejudice. It is often the last word on the lips of the dying. "Mamafesta," is what Joyce called *Finnegans Wake*. So it is not surprising that a mother comes first, at least from the human side of things, in the Christian story of redemption. Or that the man—Joseph, that is—is conspicuously shunted to the side.

So Joseph's status as foster father may be worth thinking more about. Compared to the intimacy, risks, and rewards of motherhood, all fatherhood is, Joyce suggests, a kind of foster fatherhood. And if read broadly, Joseph's consternation over Mary's seeming procreative autonomy is the consternation of every man over a woman's procreative near self-sufficiency. From the only

Anne Porter

A Carol

Painters can speak
To anyone
Who can see

Musicians
To anyone
Who can hear

A poet
Can speak only
To someone
Who knows
His native language

I can speak to you
In your straw-lined cradle

You know all languages.

The Icon

Here in this icon out of ancient Russia
Brown as amber the little Mother of God
Holding her Infant to her cheek
Is present to us
In all her wise
And peaceful sorrow

A forest hermit painted this
They say at night his face
Lit up the snow

And he befriended robbers
And very often
He gave the bears his bread.

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begetter to the countless begotten, every human father is a stand-in.

In this context, it is pleasing paradox that patriarchal religion should single out as a model of fatherly duty a man who is denied any biological connection to the son for whom he is remembered, and in whose name he is venerated. Joseph, as Joyce might say, seems utterly superfluous in the central drama of the Incarnation. How we make sense of this paragon of fatherhood who yet is not a father in the strict definition of the word tells us something about the nature of God as well as our own destiny.

Of course, Joseph was not above worldly or stereotypical masculine concerns. Scripture is determined to provide answers of a sort to the delicate questions about Joseph's and Mary's conjugal life. Learning of Mary's condition, Joseph is perplexed—as perplexed as the most incredulous New Testament reader. Understandably, he "resolved to divorce her quietly." He may have been concerned about Mary's safety, for the penalty for adultery was stoning. Happily, the problem is resolved by the intervention of an angel, to this day the most practical solution to the problem of suspected adultery. "Do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit," goes history's most famous reassurance of a suspicious husband. Joseph is obedient. Very much like Bloom's return to the adulterous Molly, Joseph turns away from any attempt to control things. Dependency is somehow equated with humanity in both instances. In choosing faith and constancy over doubt and separation, Joseph establishes himself as the guardian of the savior of the world and subsequently as a protector of children and virgins down through the ages. To be sure, Joseph's willingness to give credence to what the Holy Spirit tells him in his dreams also established him as the butt of a million jokes. As a befuddled cuckold, he became a stock figure of ridicule in story, legend, and song. Indeed, the popular imagination finds it hard to separate Joseph from the idea of cuckoldry, even if he has been cuckolded by the Progenitor of us all. In the traditional English "Cherry Tree Carol," Joseph emerges as a very human figure indeed.

Joseph was an old man,
And an old man was he,
When he wedded Mary
In the land of Galilee.

Joseph and Mary walked
Through an orchard good,
Where was cherries and berries
So red as any blood...

O then bespoke Mary,
With words so meek and mild
"Pluck me one cherry, Joseph
For I am with child."

O then bespoke Joseph,
With answer most unkind,
"Let him pluck thee a cherry
That brought thee now with child."

O then bespoke the baby
Within his mother's womb—
"Bow down then the tallest tree
For my mother to have some."

Then bowed down the highest tree,
Unto his mother's hand.
Then she cried, "See, Joseph,
I have cherries at command."

O then bespake Joseph—
"I have done Mary wrong;
But now cheer up, my dearest,
And do not be cast down.

"O eat your cherries, Mary,
O eat your cherries now,
O eat your cherries, Mary,
That grow upon the bough...."

In religious art, at least until relatively modern times, Joseph is usually portrayed as an elderly man, lending credence to both Jesus' otherworldly paternity and making more plausible Mary's perpetual virginity. As a heavenly patron, Joseph—Mary's chaste and holy spouse and Jesus' father—was thought to be particularly well situated to intercede on behalf of his earthly clients. But to a large extent, any cult of Saint Joseph lay dormant through the first millennium of Christianity. This is attributed to the problems Joseph's status as husband presents to both the idea of Mary's virginal conception and her perpetual virginity. Once those doctrines were firmly established, Joseph could emerge as a more substantial figure in his own right.

Asking what we know about the "real" Joseph is a bit like asking what we know about real sightings of Elvis. Obviously there is little we can know. Scripture, as usual, contradicts itself on many of the relevant facts. In Matthew, for example, it is Joseph, not Mary, who receives the Annunciation of Jesus' birth. Joseph's gospel appearances are confined to the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke, although his status as Jesus' foster father is referred to briefly elsewhere. No actual word of Joseph's is recorded in the New Testament.

According to biblical scholar John P. Meier, Joseph was most likely a native of Nazareth and an observant Jew. What Joseph's occupation was, except that he worked as a craftsman, is uncertain. What seems certain, at least according to scholarly consensus, is that Joseph's conspicuous absence from the accounts of Jesus' ministry in all likelihood indicates that he had died before Jesus began his public life. Joseph is not with Mary at the foot of the cross.

Questions about the Virgin Birth and Mary and Joseph's chaste marriage are outside the competence of scholarly investigation, Meier winningly notes. Obviously, the virginal conception of Jesus lies at the heart of the Christian incarnational message

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and any real understanding of Joseph. As the historian Peter Brown has written in *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, "the cult of the Virgin offered the luminous inversion of the dark myth of shared fallen flesh." Mary's motherhood of Jesus redeems "the physical bonds created between human beings by their bodies." Through Mary, Christians have been able to embrace the full humanity of Jesus, for in looking at Christ they "looked on the flesh of a kinsman, taken from the tranquil human substance of the Virgin's womb."

Alongside the mystery of Mary's "yes" to God stands the curious figure of Joseph, who was as obedient and faithful in his way as Mary was in hers. Under the circumstances, you might say Joseph's chaste fidelity was a miracle in its own right. "Let him pluck thee a cherry,/ That brought thee now with child," the Joseph of popular imagination confronts his wife's apparent betrayal. Yet the Joseph of tradition miraculously soldiers on, laboring like a very bandog, searching for shelter where Mary can give birth, fleeing to Egypt to protect his young foster son, traveling to Jerusalem to have his first-born dedicated at the Temple, returning to the Temple courtyard in search of Jesus when he was left behind as a twelve-year-old. "Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been looking for you anxiously," Mary reprimands her son only to be told a mystery. "How is it that you sought me," Jesus replies. "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"

In such riddles, we are vividly reminded of Joseph's surrogate status. Yet his fidelty did not waver; not much, anyway. Doubtless that is the obvious and yet difficult point. All human constancy seems miraculous given the transitory nature of things. The faithful are vulnerable to the mockery of the world. As Joseph is. As Leopold Bloom is in his essentially chaste marriage to the adulterous Molly. Joyce even plays these two cuckolds off against each other. "*Qui vous a mis dans cette fichue position*?" Stephen Dedalus idly remembers a French joke. "*C'est le pigeon, Joseph.*" Similarly, Buck Mulligan, Stephen's blaspheming companion, put the implausibility of Jesus' origins into the "Ballad of the Joking Jesus."

I'm the queerest young fellow that ever you heard.
My mother's a jew, my father's a bird.
With Joseph the joiner I cannot agree,
So here's to disciples and Calvary.

Ulysses is notoriously the chronicle of the exceedingly ordinary events of that June day in 1904 (the actual day Joyce met his wife Nora). Joyce's mock epic gives to the humblest of human activities and the humblest of lives the solemnity of ritual. In both Joyce and the story of Joseph, what is most characteristically human depends on memory and the tangible presence of the past. That depth of time and experience finally depends on simple, or not so simple, human constancy and love. In *Ulysses*, that love is manifest in the life Bloom and Molly have shared, and which now, despite every betrayal, is an inexpungeable part of who they are individually. Constancy, for which Joseph is rightly remembered, is the essential virtue. Without it—without daily human promise-making and keeping—we cannot hope to see ourselves or life whole. Promise-keeping connects the past to the future—and promise-keeping, of course, is how God makes himself known to his chosen people.

Leopold Bloom's transcendent virtue is this sort of dogged constancy. This humane steadfastness prepares him to become Stephen Dedalus's spiritual father. Like Joseph, Bloom is a practical family man, a Jew, a provider and protector. Like Joseph, he is a prosaic figure yet "a just man." Like Joseph, Bloom is a cuckold who yet demonstrates a larger and truer loyalty, and in doing so a redemptive sense of human possibility. If Joseph must call upon angels to assuage his doubts over Mary's miraculous conception, Bloom calls upon the angels of his better nature to accept with loving equanimity his wife's waywardness. "By what reflections did he, a conscious reactor against the void incertitude, justify to himself his sentiments?" Bloom answers: "...the futility of triumph or protest or vindication: the inanity of extolled virtue: the lethargy of nescient matter: the apathy of the stars." In other words, Bloom will trust his heart against the logic of the calculating world. Life's betrayals cannot be remedied through human mastery and manipulation. Bloom, the doting family man, knows that self-sufficiency is an illusion. Love puts an end to self-sufficiency. As Anthony Burgess wrote in his wonderfully engaging study *ReJoyce*, the human message of *Ulysses* is simple: We need each other.

Fatherhood is one way in which men live that need, and is perhaps the most seductive way in which we try to extend our imagined control over life. But for Joyce, paternity is a sign of the limited nature of our control. Bloom is the truest father because he is the least vain of men. Paternity, like any good and truly human thing, is something given to us, not something we can claim authorship of. From the only begetter to the countless begotten—from Joseph the carpenter to Leopold Bloom the advertising man—human fathers are but intermediaries.

Bloom is also, of course, married to another Mary (the famous Molly), a Mary who is very much a second Eve, an earth mother, a sign of creation and renewal, and of life itself. Molly is the center of things, and like the Virgin Mary she sanctifies in Joyce's scheme the bonds created between human beings by their bodies. In the famous litany of affirmation with which she concludes the novel, the adulterous Molly Bloom is understood to be just as much the handmaiden of creation as her virgin prototype. Mary and Joseph, Molly and Leopold, I want to say, are two of a kind.

For Joyce fatherhood is a powerful sign of the paradoxical nature of reality. Similarly, Karl Barth, the Protestant theologian, saw in the mystery of Jesus' birth a sign of the ultimate nature of God. What was the meaning, Barth asked in his explication of the Creed, of "the miracle of the procreation of Jesus Christ without a father"? Mary's virginal conception of Jesus was not a sexual but a pneumatological act. "God himself takes the stage as the Creator and not as a partner to this Virgin," Barth writes. Yet it is within a woman's body that this new creation and ultimate self-revelation of God takes form. Joseph, as we have observed throughout this essay, is point-

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edly "excluded." What are we to make of the "powerless figure of Joseph"?

Barth regards Joseph's exclusion as a judgment. To the extent that "the male [is understood] as the specific agent of human action and history" such perishable human accomplishment is subordinated to God's power as creator and redeemer. Joseph as representative man is a symbol of all human vanity, of "the sovereignty of human will and power and activity generally." In this sense, perhaps it is as fathers—as worldly creators—that men are most tempted to imagine themselves self-sufficient and self-perpetuating. Both Joyce and the Bible suggest that such *hubris* is less a temptation for women, who in giving birth to all new life have a more realistic understanding of our connection and dependence on the source of life itself. "In this sovereignty"—in this human longing for mastery and autonomy—"man is not free for God's Word." Only "when his sovereignty is excluded, is he able to believe in the Word of God."

Or the words of Joyce. Saint Joseph, like Leopold Bloom, remains a compelling figure because of the way he relinquishes sovereignty where we expect him to demand it most. In looking to either one, it is possible to see that what we pride ourselves on giving to others—our trust, fidelity, and love—is not ours to withhold; that what we receive in return is not ours to keep. Where at first we feel most excluded—"Where exactly do you fit in?" asked my wife—we are ultimately most at home. For finally, we cannot make ourselves happy. Fulfillment must come from outside—it must come as a gift. That is the multifaceted paradox embodied in these two figures. Joseph and Bloom participate in the transcendent by the measure of their self-abnegation; they find reconciliation not in retribution or even justice but through faith and love; they embrace human finitude as an affirmation of mystery, not its denial. They are most fully themselves, and their stories most open to a transcendent reality, when they are least self-regarding. Bloom asleep alongside Molly and Joseph alongside Mary are icons of hopefulness. That, at least, is what this husband, father, and tender of livestock takes away from their strikingly similar stories. □

SCREEN

OVERLY SANGUINE

'INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE'

Watching *Interview with the Vampire* is like going to a college Halloween ball thrown by the departments of drama, painting, and music. The students wouldn't be content with dressing up and dancing but would create tableaux of gorgeous hideousness, would boom Berlioz and Mussorgsky from loudspeakers, recite the poetry of French decadents, and stage mock attacks on beautiful maidens and *ephebi* by lustful vampires and assorted ghouls. The contents of the punch bowls would look suspiciously sanguine in hue, and you might not want to inspect each canapé too carefully before ingestion.

The same goes for Neil Jordan's rendering of Anne Rice's novel, scripted by Rice herself. Don't be put off by such unsavory verbal canapés as "Evil has a point-of-view. God kills indiscriminately and so do we." The sophomoric language, cushioned by the lushly dank greens and blues of Philippe Rousselot's photography, matches the grotesque action: Tom Cruise waltzing with the corpse of a plague victim; a little girl vampire dispatching her fussy piano teacher right in the middle of the lesson; Brad Pitt carving up an entire theatrical troupe of vampires with a scythe. If the whole enterprise seems like *Les Fleurs du Mal* translated into purple prose by a horny adolescent, at least there's a consistency of feeling at work here: necrophilia as fun.

Tom Cruise plays Lestat, the aristocratic vampire who lures the protagonist, Louis, into the undead state and then urges him to embrace the evil consequences wholeheartedly. Lestat is so archly wicked and leeringly decadent that one yearns to see what Daniel Day-Lewis or John Malkovich would have done with him. Jordan has shrewdly coaxed Cruise along, getting him to refine his speech and gestures, guiding him toward a purring malevolence and the enjoyment of being (as another character defines the ideal vampire) "beautifully powerful and without regret." Cruise works hard, has some good moments, but too many fissures appear in the portrait. Every time he raises his voice above conversation level, to proclaim or demand, we are jolted back from the phosphorescent gloom of eighteenth-century New Orleans to 1994 Hunksville, U.S.A. And, alas, Cruise's nose, a prosaic blob, simply doesn't belong on the face of Lestat. That isn't Cruise's fault, but cinematographer Rousselot must have been in agony while working on the actor's close-ups. Brad Pitt, lither than Cruise and more adept at suggesting morbidity and inner solitude, comes closer to suc-

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cess as Louis, a role that doesn't encompass the flamboyant extremes of Lestat's behavior. But Pitt, too, is betrayed by his voice, for when he has to bellow at his plantation slaves that they are free, he sounds like a little boy trying to imitate some childish idea of how a great actor declaims. In the second half of the movie, Antonio Banderas enters as a Machiavellian successor to Lestat and he wipes his American costars off the screen. Here is a silk that doesn't tear, veiling a darkness that keeps its secrets.

Interview posits vampirism as an idealized, extremist analogue of homosexuality. All the main vampires in this movie are male and, though they prey on both sexes for nourishment, they seek only other men for abiding companionship. And the relationship between Lestat and Louis, the bonding of experienced voluptuary with tormented novice, follows the pattern of some of the most famous homosexual relationships in Western culture: Verlaine and Rimbaud, Diaghilev and Nijinsky, Jean Cocteau and Raymond Radiguet.

Some of the other analogies are more disturbing. Resembling gay couples who long for children, Pitt and Cruise "adopt" a little girl. That they turn her into a vampire may be seen as an enactment of the heterosexual's fear of what may happen to a child adopted by gays. I realize this is the sort of interpretation that will warm the heart of Jesse Helms, but the analogy is unavoidable and surely neither Rice nor Jordan can be unaware of it.

And, of course, there's the inevitable AIDS connection. Blood is the drink of life to vampires, but it's the carrier of death nowadays to many gays. To see Louis ravenously feasting on Lestat's veins in order to achieve the vampiric gift of eternal life will seem to many to be a fantasy-defiance of our current plague.

Dramatically, the movie is hobbled by sloppy storytelling. The destination of the plot is to show the eventual moral degradation of Louis via his transformation from a vampire willing to subsist on animals to a ghoul, like his mentor Lestat, casually feasting on the blood of murdered humans. But when and how is this fall from grace brought about? When we first see Louis chomp a human (the little girl), he flees before he can kill her. When he and the child voyage to Europe, fellow passengers are murdered. By whom? We know that the little girl has become a practiced killer, but has Louis become one, too? Louis eventually drains a woman's blood but only with her consent in order to give her eternal life. He himself specifies this as the moral downturn in his life, but why? Surely he's done it out of compassion and not to feed himself. And when he next kills, it's in righteous vengeance, his opponents are utterly evil, and again Louis does not feast. And when Louis rejects the influence of Antonio Banderas, who represents the purest evil in the movie, he seems to be taking a step toward redemption. So, when we see Louis near the close of the story as a listlessly predatory serial murderer who does indeed snuff out unwilling prey, it comes as a puzzlement. Is the answer in the book? I'll never find out, for life is much too short for a mere mortal like me to spend even nanoseconds of it reading Anne Rice. Vampires and Rice fans will not, I fear, sympathize.

On the whole, *Interview* is fun, for Neil Jordan has here achieved what Kenneth Branagh significantly failed to create in his recent version of Frankenstein: a cinematic universe with a décor, atmosphere, and tempo that allow us to consent to the supernatural. The imagery holds us even when the story line falters. I won't soon forget such sights as Louis's midnight encounter with a dapper vampire in the Paris streets, the latter doing a little jig up the façades of buildings, or (the best scene in the movie) the Grand Guignol performance put on by the vampire troupe in which farcical mock-executions are followed by the real sacrifice of an innocent girl while the audience slowly and doubtingly becomes aware that something on stage is very peculiar indeed. Here, for once, the enjoyable masquerade-ball nonsense of the movie modulates into something truly sinister and disturbing.

But the most disturbing thing about *Interview with the Vampire* doesn't appear on screen but in some of the statements Neil Jordan has made to the press. When I read that the writer-director of *Mona Lisa* and *The Crying Game*—movies that pierce the heart rather than the jugular—is designating *Interview* as his most personal film yet, I wish I had Lestat's power of telepathy and could whisper into Jordan's inner ear, "Thanks for the ticket to the costume ball. But please get back to earth real soon."

RICHARD ALLEVA

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Among the poor

THE SOUL OF POLITICS
A Practical and Prophetic Vision for Social Change
Jim Wallis
New Press/Orbis, $19.95, 275 pp.

NOT ALL OF US ARE SAINTS
A Doctor's Journey with the Poor
David Hilfiker, M.D.
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, $20, 259 pp.

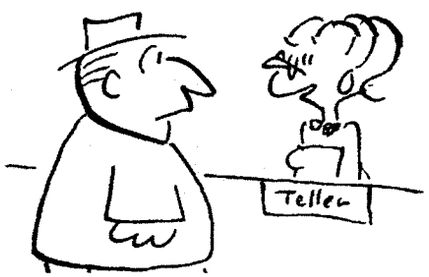
Stephen J. Pope

The "preferential option for the poor" has been associated with the "base Christian communities" and the liberation theologies of Latin America, yet the same kind of commitment to compassion, solidarity, and social transformation can be found in two recent books about life among the poor in the United States.

Jim Wallis's *The Soul of Politics* is the product of his years of struggling against poverty and violence on the streets of Washington, D.C., Detroit, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Wallis, founding editor of *Sojourners* magazine, argues for the development of a viable political morality that is transformative, substantive, and religiously grounded. His discussion is divided into prophetic and visionary components. For many commentators, "public" is equated with "secular," but not so for Wallis, who argues that the moral vision of politics must be rooted ultimately in a spirituality that emerges from the concrete human experience of the poor. It is precisely the experience of the poor that endorses a communitarian commitment to social change based on the moral values of personal compassion, grassroots citizen politics and political mobilization, respect for cultural diversity, sexual and gender inclusivity, community-based economic development, and ecological conservation.

Wallis develops a prophetic mode of moral discourse, and therein lie his strengths and weaknesses. He effectively recounts the human suffering encountered in face-to-face meetings with inner-city residents to underscore our profound failure as a society to live up to the American ideals of equality and liberty, and he persuasively demonstrates that racism has produced a two-tiered system of education and economic opportunity. Moreover, *The Soul of Politics* is a passionate testimony to progressive evangelical Christianity, and a helpful corrective to the widespread identification of evangelical Christianity with the Religious Right and the defenders of the "gospel of prosperity." Its strength lies in a consistent call to conversion and an unmistakable commitment to the politics of compassion. Wallis effectively challenges his readers to scrutinize their own integrity as Christians and, in particular, to examine whether their concrete life decisions, from family structure to the uses of money, are consistent with professed Christian faith. Wallis is quite effective in the role of Christian "gadfly," particularly regarding the dangers of consumerism and the "commodification of human life."

But two difficulties attend this prophetic perspective. First, Wallis tends to be simplistically moralistic and excessively ideological. He reduces a vast array of human problems to simple moral and spiritual failures. "The crisis of the global economy is, at root, a moral one"; "a failure of ethics is at the root of our many related crises." Reading Wallis one has the impression that a transformation of moral consciousness would solve all of our economic, political, social, and ecological problems—from unemployment in Washington, D.C., to the threatened extinction of the California condor. Wallis is correct to maintain that morality and spirituality are crucially important, but they are not the only challenges confronting us.



"Our board of directors got religion, sir, and gave all your money to poor people."

Second, the prophetic stance is quite different from a public policy perspective, or from the responsibilities of a person in a position of political power. Wallis is clearly more adept at making sweeping moral indictments and visionary proclamations than at offering policy proposals that advance concrete, incremental changes. The difficult question regarding the specific relevance of distinctively Christian spirituality for matters of public morality is never entertained. Instead, Wallis operates at a very high level of generality. "The way of Jesus and the prophets," he writes, "isn't just a welfare program; it calls for a change of heart, a revolution of the spirit, a transformation of our consciousness." Spirituality is not reducible to a "welfare program," to be sure, but what is its real import for the policy maker facing various proposed reforms of monthly payments for AFDC recipients or for determining eligibility requirements for the administration of Medicaid?

David Hilfiker's *Not All of Us Are Saints* provides, in a different vein, another recent North American exemplification of the "preferential option for the poor." Drawn to live in Washington, D.C., in 1983 out of a faith-inspired sense of obligation to help the poor, Hilfiker practiced

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medicine for ten years at Community of Hope Health Services, a small church-sponsored inner-city clinic, and at Christ House Mission Group, a medical recovery shelter for homeless men and a home for their caregivers.

On one level Hilfiker's narrative develops as a form of social criticism examining the institutional reasons—from substandard education and joblessness to racial discrimination and overly routinized and demoralized social service administration—that make escape from poverty nearly impossible for many people. In a beautifully clear and direct writing style, he provides a riveting account of his experiences with the world of overcrowded, underheated, and rodent-infested public shelters, of hospitals discharging patients with tuberculosis or other infectious diseases into the shelter system, of a city detoxification center which turned people away "because they weren't drunk enough," and of hopelessly understaffed child protective services which refused to investigate blatantly abusive families.

Writing in the vein of Jonathan Kozol and Alex Kotlowitz, Hilfiker's depiction of inner-city misery ought to stir the compassion of middle-class Americans and thereby inspire a deeper commitment to providing minimal health care. Yet he does not write naively or with a simplistic assumption that disclosing the suffering of the urban underclass will prompt immediate action from middle America. First, the personal consequences of the "internalization of poverty" penetrate more deeply than either social engineers or kindhearted voters realize. Second, the problem is not a lack of information but rather "compassion fatigue"—the fact that the wider public has become "numbed" to the deterioration of the inner city and to the suffering of those trapped within it.

On another level, the narrative constitutes a form of introspective analysis that probes with ruthless honesty the author's own complex reactions (including his fears, distress, and episodes of depression) when repeatedly confronted with the chronic physical and mental problems of his patients. His story explores the tensions and ambiguities he felt as a highly educated professional who attempts to be part of a community comprised primarily of people from another class, culture, and race, people utterly lacking in the basic support, opportunities, and hope that middle-class Americans take for granted.

Intense awareness of the disparity of opportunity heightens Hilfiker's sense of the injustice underlying the health problems of poor people and his anger at the unresponsiveness and cynicism found in some public service workers charged with their care. But acute cognizance of his own temptations, lapses, and failures prompts him to accept his own frailties and limitations as one basis for accepting those of his patients

The "preferential option for the poor" takes on a particularly personal character in the author's discussion of the impact of inner-city living on his own children, especially concerning their physical safety and education. Again and again, issues of personal responsibility and social fairness are examined. Living side-by-side with the "wretched of the earth," Hilfiker asks, "in what sense do I deserve my wealth? If I possess these luxuries while they suffer in poverty, can there ever be community between me and my patients at Community of Hope? What happens to my sense of integrity when I live so comfortably while those with whom I would be friends remain—by accident of birth—homeless and marginalized?"

Hilfiker develops a narrative rather than a prophetic mode of moral discourse, recounting his encounters with the inner-city poor in a way that is sympathetic, sensitive, and yet entirely devoid of sentimentality. He offers a fascinating "phenomenology" of the "preferential option for the poor" from the perspective of one inner-city physician, a man who is introspective without being self-absorbed, intelligent without being pretentious, and hopeful without being naive. Though unmistakably committed to Christian moral ideals, Hilfiker displays a spiritual center of gravity that never collapses religion into mere social activism or compassion. Like Wallis, because Hilfiker lives with the poor, he yearns to communicate "the terrifying discrepancy between the lives we live and our concepts of justice and mercy."

He succeeds. □

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FOR THE LOVE OF ROSEMARY SHEEHAN

THE DANGEROUS LIVES OF ALTAR BOYS
Chris Fuhrman
University of Georgia Press, $19.95, 187 pp.

Michael O. Garvey

One autumn afternoon many years ago, I joyfully risked death, taking a running leap across a lethal, rocky ledge and plunging what seemed like four thousand feet into the green water of a flooded New England stone quarry to make myself worthy of a pretty girl named Rosemary Sheehan, or perhaps just to get her attention. I was fifteen at the time, unchaperoned, hormone-deranged, and in love. Every adult parent carries at least one such memory and uncomfortably rediscovers its piercing beauty and folly and danger whenever an overripened child ventures beyond protective domestic reach. We all know that if our pubescent babies manage to survive and become mature men and women, they will do so by means of tragedy alone. No wonder we sometimes recoil from them.

The presumably grown-up narrator of Chris Fuhrman's first and last novel is a veteran of tragedy whose account of being rudderless in adolescent whitewater begins like this: "By eighth grade, Jesus Christ had been bone meal and rumors for most of 1,974 years, but we were only thirteen. We were daredevils, gangsters. I had a girl's name, Francis, and a hernia."

Francis Doyle, an eighth grader at Blessed Heart School in Savannah, Georgia, is chafing under its fatuous religiosity and bourgeois rectitude ("The nuns thought 'Bridge over Troubled Water' was brainwashing us to shoot heroin. Things like that.") The universe as glimpsed through his eyes is a crowded, turbulent, and unpredictable place. The latch-key kid of well-meaning, but distracted and abusive parents, Francis has recently spent a day in the juvenile detention center for shoplifting, having been apprehended in the local K-Mart because, as Tim Sullivan, his best friend and the leader of their gang tells him, "You did the genteel Robert E. Lee thing instead of hauling ass like the rest of us." Francis is an endearingly, even heartbreakingly screwed-up suburban teen-ager who sneaks drinks, carries a machete, orders sea monkeys by mail from the back pages of comic books, smokes dope, and weeps for the whole world. He is terrified of mortality, tormented by bullies, distrustful of adults, alarmed by his emergent sexuality, and helplessly in love with a seventh grader named Majorie Flynn, who has a few problems of her own. A ghost in her house, for instance, is the least of them.

Francis and the gang are talented Magic Marker artists, grudgingly entrusted by school authorities with such commissions as a hallway bulletin board mural on the theme "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again." They are altar boys, after all. They are also scumbags, and the collaborative authors of *Sodom and Gomorrah 74*, a samizdat satire of life at Blessed Heart whose "last page showed the priests defiling fat, nude Sisters of Mercy on the church altar while our comic book selves watched in horror from the choir loft." *Sodom and Gomorrah* has been discovered by their pastor, the chain-smoking Father Kavanagh, who is deciding whether or not to issue a sort of parochial fatwah. The desperate altar boys persuade themselves that their best defense—against Kavanagh, Blessed Heart, the nuns, their parents, the complicated encroachments of the adult world, the enormousness and strangeness of the universe, and the uncertainty and fragility of life—is to capture a mountain lion and surreptitiously release it in the school.

Fairness to potential readers—and this book deserves many, many readers—precludes a summary of the adventure which ensues. What can be said is that—even if not exactly on a par with such classics as *Huckleberry Finn*, *Catcher in the Rye*, and *A Separate Peace*—*The Dangerous Lives of Altar Boys* is nevertheless a memorable, funny, and poignant depiction of a glorious boyhood chased down and brutally terminated. Fuhrman powerfully evokes adolescence through a masterly use of sensory detail from the misery of fetid dishwashing chores and the horror of playground combat to the agony of disappointed love and the exhilaration of anticipated coupling. It quickly becomes apparent that the ingenuous Francis Doyle's boorish posturing, binge drinking, and native wariness are the survival equipment of a tender sensibility in the roughest of moral terrain. As he and his friends flee through the vanishing landscape of childhood, the story takes a startling turn from irony to tragedy, and a reader begins to experience the pity of Sophocles' Odysseus for the insane Ajax, "for the terrible yoke of blindness that is on him. I think of him, yet also of myself." Not many novels can command that sort of pity amidst obscene graffiti and fart jokes.

By the novel's end, an adult Francis Doyle has created an eponymous underground comic book based on subversive memories of his life at Blessed Heart. The success of his efforts gives rise to a contract offer from DC Comics, which Francis is eager to accept because "I want people to see and hear the things I can see and hear. And I want them to remember how it was when they were children. I don't

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want them to grow up entirely." Whether or not the grown-up comic book artist succeeds, the novelist who imagined him has admirably achieved those ends, producing a story as odd, vivid, painful, splendid, and sad as adolescence itself. It is impossible to read *The Dangerous Lives of Altar Boys* without confronting again and again the memory of some tragic longing, or lethal folly, or audacious gesture, or ancient sin which has long since become peculiarly one's own.

Chris Fuhrman was thirty-one years old when he died, and *The Dangerous Lives of Altar Boys* is his first and last novel. As with John Kennedy Toole, another Southern Catholic who died at thirty-two and left behind *A Confederacy of Dunces*, Fuhrman's posthumous debut invites wistful speculation about the sort of career which might have followed it. I believe it would have been superb. □

WHAT MAKES THE MIND LEAP?

SHADOWS OF THE MIND
A Search for the Missing Science of Consciousness
Roger Penrose
Oxford, $25, 457 pp.

Chet Raymo

Years ago, one of my professors distributed to his class a collection of articles by philosophers and theologians, on the one hand, and hard scientists, on the other. He asked us to count qualifiers—words like "maybe," "perhaps," "possibly." The results took us by surprise. The philosophers and theologians tended to make unqualified assertions. The hard scientists hedged their statements with probability.

In his new book on human consciousness, Roger Penrose, a physicist and mathematician, is appropriately tentative. His subject is a big one and his speculations bold, but he hedges them with a befitting humility.

Penrose is the Rouse Ball Professor of Mathematics at the University of Oxford. He has worked with Steven Hawking on the structure and history of the universe, he is a computer whiz and the closest thing to an all-round genius we are likely to find. This is his second book to address the problem of explaining consciousness.

The first, *The Emperor's New Mind*, a rather technical treatise on physics, computers, and the mind, climbed onto the *New York Times*'s best-seller list. Its success undoubtedly reflected Penrose's stature as a thinker, and our own interest in the phenomenon of self-awareness.

In that earlier book, Penrose said he had been advised that each formula or equation would cut his readership by half. He ignored that advice, and asked his readers to hang in even in the face of an occasional formula. Apparently enough did to make the book a success.

In the present work, Penrose throws commercial caution to the wind. *Shadows of the Mind* is profoundly mathematical both in content and spirit. It is not an easy read; indeed, few readers will be qualified by training or temperament to follow the author through all the steps of his argument. However, this remains an important book, with much that is valuable to say about the science of mind.

At issue is whether computers can become conscious or self-aware. Penrose lists four attitudes toward the question:

A. Consciousness is mere computation; the brain is a computer made of meat.

B. Computers may simulate human consciousness without actually being conscious, in much the same way that a computer can simulate a hurricane without actually being a hurricane.

C. Physical activity in the brain is the basis for awareness, but this activity cannot even be simulated computationally.

D. Consciousness cannot be explained by physical, computational, or any other scientific terms.

Most artificial intelligence researchers and neuroscientists hold to A or B, for the obvious reason that these positions offer hope of timely success. People with traditionally religious world views tend to affirm D. Penrose stakes his claim on C. He believes awareness is a manifestation of the physical brain, but that it arises from activity that cannot be programmed into a computer, no matter how complex that machine might be. Attributes of mind such as insight, intuition, and self-awareness will forever transcend any algorithm or computation.

Penrose centers his argument on a famous theorem proved by the Czech-born logician Kurt Gödel in 1931. It states that any rigidly logical mathematical system contains statements that cannot be proved or disproved on the basis of axioms within the system. In other words, there are mathematical statements whose truth is accessible to human intuition and insight which cannot be proven by the applica-

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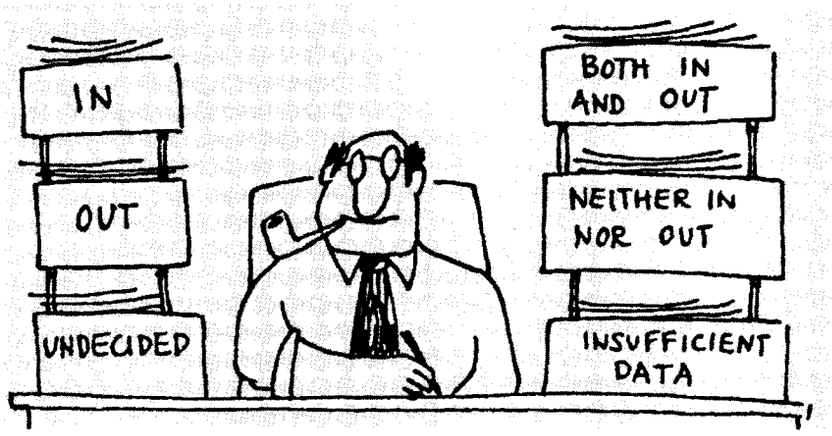

tion of any set of rules. From this Penrose concludes that human thinking contains a noncomputational ingredient.

What might it be? Mind-body dualism? A ghost in the machine? Almost certainly not, says Penrose. Then what? He looks to the strange behavior of the quantum world for his answer.

Computers are binary devices, both in logic and operation. A transistor is either on or off; a data bit is either a one or zero. Elementary particles—photons or electrons for example—follow a different logic. According to the rules of quantum physics, there is a sense in which a particle can be in two places at the same time. The properties or states of quantum systems are said to be entangled, so that even after separation two photons emitted in opposite directions from the same source seem to know what the other is doing, instantly, across centimeters, perhaps even light-years, of space. These mysteries—called Z-mysteries by Penrose, from puZZle—violate classical common sense, but they have been experimentally demonstrated.

Penrose believes the noncomputational qualities of human consciousness spring from Z-mysteries of the quantum world, perhaps having their origin in the microtubules of the cytoskeleton of the brain's neurons. According to Penrose, the leap of imagination, the spark of insight, are macromanifestations of the nonlocal, noncausal, yes-and-no laws of micronature.

The problem is that neither Penrose nor anyone else fully understands how microquantum magic is translated into macrobehavior. What is missing is a satisfactory theory connecting the quantum and classical worlds. We need to understand how the indeterminate quantum behavior of individual elementary particles achieves coherence across broad regions of the brain. Until such a theory is found, Penrose believes, no scientific explanation of human consciousness will be forthcoming.

This is a sketchy summary of a dense and difficult book. *Shadows of the Mind* is not so much an explanation of consciousness as a program for future research. However, all who are seriously interested in the scientific explanation of consciousness would do well to make themselves aware of Penrose's C-view, as well as A/B works such as Francis Crick's *Astonishing Hypothesis* and Daniel Dennet's *Consciousness Explained*. The truth is, we do not yet know enough about consciousness to choose among A, B, and C.

As for D, no scientist I know of seriously entertains the possibility that the mind exists independently of the brain, or that it will forever elude scientific explanation, but even about this possibility Penrose expresses appropriate caution. His broad expertise, incisive intelligence, and philosophical tentativeness are the strengths of this work. □

REVIEWERS

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CORRESPONDENCE

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insurance reform over the next two years. The only thing we can hope for is some reform around the edges of the problem—making job-related health-care insurance portable from one job to another, prohibiting denial of insurance to people with pre-existing conditions, and possibly providing basic coverage to children and expectant mothers—though I would not bet on the last of these.

As Christopher F. Koller suggests ["A Coroner's Report," November 4], prospects for reform may improve as time drags on and the nonvoting poor are joined by an increasing number of uninsured and underinsured members of the middle class in being priced out of the private insurance market. Cost containment, which somehow got lost in the confused debate over health-care reform in the 103rd Congress, will continue to haunt us until we face and deal with this issue.

When the bills for private health-care insurance become so large that even the most economically illiterate among us begin to recognize that they are paying for the uninsured through cost-shifting, then perhaps, in typical American fashion, we will demand that our government do something about it now that a crisis stage has been reached. The costs of dealing with the crisis will be greater than if the problem had been dealt with earlier, but we never seem to learn from experience, either our own or someone else's.

DOROTHY DILLON

Styron on 'choice'

Alkmaar, Holland

To the Editors: I was deeply touched by Margaret O'Brien Steinfels's comment on *Roe* v. *Wade* ["What Women Have Lost," October 21] because it seems to ex-

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press so clearly the ironic, almost cynical understanding of "choice" that some of us have come to learn only too well. Since my own bleak experience with the pressure to abort, the birth of my daughter eighteen years ago, and the subsequent decay of my first marriage, I have been haunted by that word, choice. A few years ago it occurred to me that in his novel *Sophie's Choice*, published in 1976 (only three years after *Roe*), William Styron may have been dealing with that very issue, the real meaning of choice, at a time when the idea had begun to be bandied about with frightening ease.

I had only seen the film. So I bought the book and read it with only one goal in mind: Was Styron trying to uncover the real problem of choice? I believe he was. I took copious notes as I read (I'd never read a book this way before). From the opening epigraph from Rilke's *Duino Elegies* ("Who'll show a child just as it is?....But this, though: death, the whole of death, even before life's begun, to hold it all so gently, and be good: this is beyond description!") to the last pages describing the faceless Dr. Niemand at Auschwitz, it seemed to me that Styron was writing an allegory for our age: Society (a faceless force, *niemand*, no one) is forcing horribly cruel choices on people, and the result is social suicide.

Perhaps because *Sophie's Choice* had seemed to be *the* Holocaust novel, I had never thought of looking at it this way. Because there's no *Reader's Guide* at our local Dutch library, and I'm rather isolated here, I don't know if the book has been analyzed in this light; I'd welcome any help readers may provide. Let me add that *Commonweal* is the one magazine that can sabotage my schedule; thank you for your good work. NANCY FOREST-FLIER

Don't blame 'Roe'

Auburn, Wash.

To the Editors: Margaret O'Brien Steinfels's suggestion that in gaining "choice" women have lost something important may be valid. Socrates said, or was it Cicero, "*lunchum freeum non est.*" But I don't believe, as her article seems to suggest, that *Roe* v. *Wade* has a role in the dismal deportment of males. Men were curs before *Roe*.

I think the worst thing to befall women and children does have a name beginning with "R," but it is *R*epublican, not *R*oe. Republicans have intensified the conditions that contribute to unwanted pregnancy and abortion. Poverty is often the reason for bastardy and is also a significant cause of abortion decisions. If girls and women could reasonably expect the benefits of education, job preparation, and careers at the level of their ability, with incomes to match, there would be less dallying with irresponsible studs, more selectivity in dating, more postponement of sexual intercourse. Not until marriage, not in our culture, but until a worthier fellow happens along. For most women, that won't happen until they are in their twenties, male maturation being so retarded.

Poverty and lack of opportunity are part of the childhood and youth of so many girls. These conditions contribute to low self-regard, both directly and via the consequences of poor performance in school. They wind up insecure and lonely, and with no visible future but a man. They are vulnerable to men and may become pregnant. Whether they abort or keep the child, their future remains dependent on a man.

It gets worse. Now everybody wants to eliminate welfare. Charles Murray and others are now including Head Start on the list of unneeded programs, on the grounds that the gains evident in the first grade (when the program ends) are diminished by the third and gone by the sixth. After Head Start is gone altogether, Republicans will use the same logic to write long studies showing that the school lunch program is a failure. "The nourishing lunch received on Monday is gone by Tuesday. Fed on Tuesday, they are hungry the next day. They are not fed on Saturday and Sunday. Obviously they do not need federally sponsored lunches at all. Afternoon classes are filled with lethargic children, overly contented because their bellies are full. School lunch interferes with education. Children are in school to learn, not to eat. Therefore the school lunch program should be eliminated." EARL LANDAU

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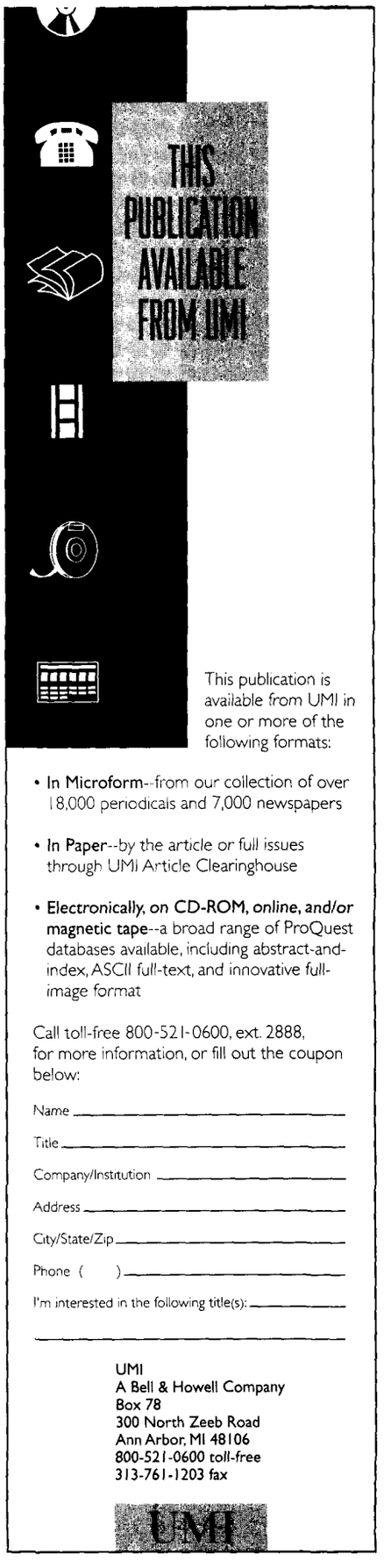

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No room in the Oratory

G. MacDONALD YOUNG

British reserve is legendary. One way to experience it is through travel in a first-class carriage of British Railways. On entering, one feels the penetrating glance of a pair of eyes briefly raised over a copy of *The Times*; one sees a slight flaring of the nostrils; one may hear a couple of all-but-inaudible sniffs, followed by retreat behind the paper. The brash American visitor who risks starting a conversation courts a snub.

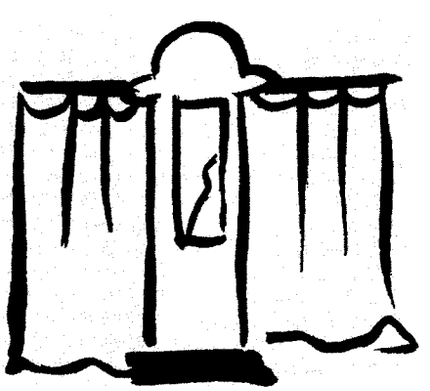
During a visit to London some years ago my wife and I encountered a less typical instance of British conservatism. We decided to attend midnight Mass on Christmas Eve at Brompton Oratory, that great baroque fastness of English Catholicism, the forum and headquarters of Cardinal John Henry Newman. Despite its size the church was already jammed when we arrived, but we managed to squeeze into a crowded side chapel that offered no view of the main altar. We could hear the hymns of Handel, Bach, Brahms, and others, beautifully rendered by a small chamber orchestra and an accomplished choir; but we were, to speak Britishly, uncomfortable. Both of us were suffering from jet lag, made harder to bear by a rather overpowering condition known as "fug"—a quaint word meaning a combination of body heat and humid air creating an atmosphere reminiscent of a locker room.

Wanting to give up, we fidgeted our way from the center of the throng toward a wall where further progress toward the door was thwarted by the presence of a large confessional. While I leaned against it for support, my fingers began idly examining the carved woodwork around the edge of the half-door through which the priest entered; when my fingers reached the bolt, I absentmindedly slid it open and promptly stumbled into the priest's compartment of the confessional.

And what did I see there? I saw a seat, a perfectly functional seat. I glanced at it, then at my wife; she looked at me and then at the seat. Our thoughts were in accord. Gallantly I indicated that she should try the seat. She did so. I proceeded very gently to thrust my nether person alongside of hers, but the seat was too small to accommodate both posteriors; so, for some minutes, I occupied only the front edge of one side of the seat, until my good wife, with equal gallantry, shifted forward to permit the easing back of my entire hinder region while she sat on the edge. We continued to alternate in this fashion through an entire lengthy sermon delivered in a mellifluous Oxford accent by the unseen rector of the Oratory.

We were, of course, observed. Reactions were varied. I noted some of the most startled double-takes I have ever seen—followed, in most instances, by glances of varying degrees of disapproval and even disdain. I did detect a few signs of what might have been amusement, but on the whole it was clear that sitting in the priest's cubicle of a confessional in Brompton Oratory just isn't done.

There came a time of testing: the Offertory, the point at which (1) the gifts are blessed at the altar and (2) the collection is taken. Leaning out of the cubicle, I observed a young priest approaching through the crowd with a collection plate, rousing in me a mild trepidation like that of the little boy with his hand in the cookie jar who hears a parent approaching. What to do? The young cleric was getting close. To retreat seemed at once too bold and too cowardly. We both reached the same solution at the same moment: We reached forward in unison and pulled the door shut, and the velvet drape covering the upper part of the half-door fell discreetly into place.



For the next minute or so we heard the tinkling of coins as they were dropped into the collection plate. How long should we stay concealed? It would be most embarrassing to open the door prematurely. But the fug within was worse than the fug without; our discomfort in the close confines of the cubicle increased. Then came into play one of the more agreeable national traits of the British, a sense of sportsmanship. We heard a discreet knock on the woodwork, and a voice whispered softly, "It's all right, you can come out, he's gone." On opening the door we could not identify our benefactor; no one gave a sign.

The service went on at great and tiring length, and I was again becoming restive when I observed a very old gentleman, large of stature and girth, wearing a most luxuriant beard with tresses of thick hair flowing over his shoulders. He bore a most startling resemblance to the likenesses of Walt Whitman I have seen in his works; more to the point, he looked very tired and indeed unwell. My wife and I again had the same idea at the same time. We left our retreat and I indicated the available seat to the old man, who accepted it gratefully. Though there had been some moving about among the people near the confessional, it was good to know that at least some of those who saw us enter it also saw our good deed. I had the feeling that our breach of British propriety had been ameliorated. □

The late G. MacDonald Young taught English and literature at Sewanhaka Senior High School in Floral Park, New York.

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The FOURTH GENERAL MEETING of
THE INTERNATIONAL THOMAS MERTON SOCIETY

SUMMONED TO EXPLORE THE HEART
Thomas Merton's Prophetic Challenge

Saint Bonaventure University
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